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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Psychology of the Leftward March

As with Nixon, Democrats mistake Trump for an extremist. That in turn drives them to extremes.

By Barton Swaim

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'Vote McGovern,' a 1972 Andy Warhol painting, at the British Museum in London, March 6, 2017. **PHOTO: CARL COURT/GETTY IMAGES**

What has caused the Democratic Party to run so far, so fast to the left? You could answer that question by recourse to a variety of indicators: demographic, historical, economic, technological. What you can't do is deny the premise. The abolition of private health insurance, a 70% top income-tax rate, an annual tax on wealth, the socialization of higher education, the elimination of border enforcement (and thus of borders),

reparations for slavery, a return to forced busing, a wholesale remaking of the nation's economy to fight climate change—all are openly proposed and discussed by the party's leaders.

Add to these proposals the almost daily exhibitions of radicalism by Democratic officeholders and their admirers and allies: requiring that manholes be termed "maintenance holes," renaming buildings named for American presidents, defending the bizarre notion that the Betsy Ross flag might be a symbol of bigotry and shame, banning straws, calling any military parade fascist. That large segments of the Democratic Party have suddenly radicalized is undeniable. But what's driving the change?

I am partial to a psychological interpretation. Donald Trump has given Americans on the political left the emotional license to embrace their craziest, most fanciful ideas. They might have been inclined to express these ideas cautiously or not at all if someone other than Mr. Trump were president. But he is president, and they must have everything they've ever wanted or ever thought they might want, now.

The reason for this response, if I'm right, isn't so much that progressives hate Mr. Trump. They hated George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan with an almost equal intensity. (Republicans hated Barack Obama and Bill Clinton with equal fervor—Democrats have no monopoly on irrational hatred.) What's allowed progressives to give way to their most radical urges isn't simple hatred but a peculiar notion about the 45th president.

In the progressive mind, Mr. Trump is every conservative's dream come true. He is, they imagine, what Republicans have always secretly longed for in a president. He fetishizes wealth. He is cruel. He is a proud philistine and a chauvinist. He lies when it's convenient. And—above all—he is a racist.

I don't say every progressive thinks of conservatives in this way in all respects, but Mr. Trump, as progressives understand him, is close to what they've always suspected conservatives to be.

Of course, Mr. Trump is vastly more complicated and interesting than progressives give him credit for—few men in history, and certainly not Donald Trump, are as wantonly evil as today's progressives believe Mr. Trump is. And in any case he isn't remotely close to an ideal conservative. What led a majority of Republicans to choose this former Democrat and sexual libertine as their nominee in 2016 was a complicated set of circumstances that no one fully understands. Recall that he'd run for president before and got nowhere. That he wasn't Republicans' ideal candidate in 2016 is apparent by

the large numbers of conservatives who couldn't support him even after his nomination. Some still don't. In the progressive imagination, though, Mr. Trump *is* conservatism: heartless, lacking all conviction, dismissive of nuance, interested only in self-advancement, arrogant.

Progressives' emotional reasoning appears to be thus: Republicans got everything they wanted in 2016. We have a right to do the same. Whereas they achieved pure evil, we will achieve pure good. No more compromising with the other side. No more concessions to reality. Republicans hit their jackpot in 2016. We will hit ours in 2020.

Something similar happened in 1972. Richard Nixon was never the embodiment of conservatism liberals thought he was. The relationship between Nixon and conservatives (conservative intellectuals, certainly) was always uneasy. By the middle of his first term, many conservatives no longer supported the president at all and hoped, vainly, that the more ideologically consistent Rep. John Ashbrook could mount a credible challenge in the '72 primaries. Nonetheless for liberals, Nixon was the embodiment of the Republican ideal: ruthless, shifty, retrogressive, boorish, populist in the worst sense.

There was some truth in that view of Nixon, just as there is some truth in the view of Mr. Trump held by progressives today. But Nixon was far more than the sum of his vices, and so is Mr. Trump.

The Democrats' simpleminded view of Nixon, though, pushed them over the edge in 1972. The leftward lurch made no sense except as a psychological response to a nonexistent monster. If Republicans had achieved everything they wanted in 1968—ensconcing an unprincipled populist reactionary in the White House—then they, too, would pursue their most radical dreams with untrammelled enthusiasm. The result: An unlikable and beatable Republican exceeded 60% of the popular vote and carried 49 states.

The circumstances are totally different now, clearly. Mr. Trump will not win in a landslide. But he may just win in 2020 for the same reason Nixon crushed George McGovern in 1972: Democrats thought conservatives had achieved their wildest dreams four years before and tried to do the same. If only they had studied their opponents a bit more closely.

Mr. Swaim is an editorial page writer for the Journal.

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